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CHANGING FAMILY ORGANIZATION AMONG EX-BIKINI MARSHALLESE

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In the summer of 1957, when I went to Kili Island, in the Marshalls group of Micronesia, I had intended to undertake a study of how certain attitudes become established among children and youths with respect to the advantages and disadvantages of life on the atoll of Bikini. In 1946, just over a decade earlier, the grandparents, parents, and older siblings of this younger generation had been evacuated as a community from Bikini Atoll in order that the United States government might use the lagoon and islands as a site for testing nuclear weapons. The community had previously been quite isolated from the rest of the Marshalls, and some 200 residents formed a remarkably inbred and culturally conservative group regarded by other Marshallese as an inferior and somewhat naive people.

In the early months of 1948, two years after their resettlement on Rongerik, another atoll in the relatively dry northern Marshalls, I spent a week or more on Rongerik Atoll at the request of the Government to determine the condition of their adjustment to the new environment. The atoll's resources had proved inadequate for permanent settlement on a subsistence basis, and the community had undergone a frightening experience during which the local leaders had attempted a number of innovations to meet the crisis. The entire population was removed as soon as possible and by the end of 1948, after a waiting period on Kwajalein Island, they were settled on the single island of Kili in the southern Marshalls. Here they continue to live at the present time. Adjustment to the natural conditions on Kili has not been easy, but this is for quite different reasons than prevailed on Rongerik. This aspect of their resettlement has been described elsewhere.

In 1949, about one year after the group's arrival on Kili, I was able to spend another brief period with them, enough to gather certain demographic and other information for comparison with that gained earlier on Rongerik. In the course of this field work I remarked significant differences among individuals and family groups as to their attitudes toward Kili and their remembrance of Bikini. Some hated the new island, for good reasons, and harked back constantly to Bikini as the place to which they wished to return--this was impossible because of the consequences of atomic weapons tests. Others accepted the fact of their resettlement and faced the future on Kili with an optimistic and constructive view. At that time I wondered what would be the attitudes of individuals born on Kili after 1948 who would never have the chance to know at first-hand what the Bikini of their elders had been, or might be, like.

It was 1957 before I could return again to Kili, intending to conduct research on this matter by identifying family groups of the more extreme convictions and comparing the youngsters in each group as to their developing attitudes, at the same time trying to learn something of the innovative process involved. Before I had been on Kili two days I could see that much had happened to the community since 1949, and that my first problem would be to identify and relate groups of Kilians to my remembrance of them a decade earlier, and to try to comprehend the nature of new groups which had emerged around new activities which constituted part of the community's total adjustment to Kili in that period. I must say that this job took the entire summer, and I still have to guess at what happens to the younger generation.

My principal task in 1957, apart from reconstructing the sequence of events since 1949, was to conduct a household survey: a series of intensive interviews with the occupants of the thirty house groups that made up the community. In this survey I reviewed systematically a number of topics, namely, the nature of use or other participation in activities relating to water supply, personal bathing, fishing canoes, copra driers, cooking hearths, livestock, retail stores which depended on a central wholesale outlet, household composition, and an emerging land tenure system. The material when analyzed confirms my general impression at the time that a number of profound and persistent changes are taking place in the social organization of the ex-Bikini community, and that some of these changes are completely unsuspected by the people themselves as revealed in conversations which I had with the council of elders shortly before my final departure from Kili.

I intend now to present some features of this change. I do not have time this morning to explain the reasons for the change which I have observed; in fact, I am not quite sure in some cases just what has happened, and will have to go back eventually to ask more questions of the people of Kili. When they lived on Bikini they operated within a system which gave priority to matrilineal lineage status in regard to residence, economic cooperation, distribution and consumption of food and other resources, and inheritance of real property rights. Male representatives of some 11 lineages acted together, although with some ranking of position, to provide an effective community organization. In other words the matrilocal household, representing usually two or three house groups, and the property-holding matrilineal lineage were basic for Bikini social interaction.

On Kili in 1957 I found 30 occupied houses strung out in a line generally paralleling the beach on the north-central side of the island. Two of these were used by a resident Marshallese churchman, and fall outside the Kilian village system in most matters. The remainder were nearly equally divided between a western and an eastern district which has little relevance for our analysis here. The first question I asked had to do with water supply. On a coral island such as Kili the only water for human use is rainwater or well water. The people had three cisterns, one of them in poor condition and not suitable for drinking or

cooking, and a reserve series of four wells sunk below ground inland from the village and supplying brackish water suitable for bathing and laundry. Almost every house had near it an oil drum or other container which trapped rainwater from the house roof. Each house was practically independent in this regard, therefore, and supplemented the local supply with water from the cisterns as needed. Only in extremely dry weather did the wells come importantly into use. Kinship did not appear to be a basis for sharing beyond the house group. Access to cistern or well when needed was measured by convenience in walking and carrying the water.

The kinship principle was more apparent in use of bathing facilities. Although most house groups had their own bath hut attached to or located near the dwelling, and used only by the house occupants, there were five instances of sharing by two, or three, house groups. Where this sharing existed it depended on a sibling or other lineage tie.

Copra driers had been constructed at 13 different locations in the village, and were equipped with fire hearths, sheltering roofs, and racks on which pieces of ripe coconut could be dried before sale to island traders and export for world consumption. Many of these had been built in the period 1953 to 1955 when the U. S. government initiated a community development project to assist the islanders in their adjustment to Kili. Kilians regarded them as private property associated with specifically named house groups. Regular use of the driers followed kinship lines in six instances, the link being that of adult siblings in a joint family or the membership of a single family extended two or three generations. However, no difficulty was reported in obtaining permission to use another's drier if the latter was not in use by the owner group; if justification was needed, one could usually find some kinship tie to refer to, the closeness of affiliation seemed unimportant. All cases of sharing bath facilities were identified with copra-drier share groups, although the latter were slightly more numerous and more inclusive.

When it came to cooking hearths, I found that practically every house group cooked over an open hearth a short distance from the dwelling, when the weather was clear, and in this sense was autonomous. But in rainy weather, some shelter was required, a roofed cook hut, sometimes attached to the copra drier, sometimes not. I found the same number of cook huts as copra driers, and in all but two cases the complex of sharing was identical. In the exception, factors of convenience seemed to have brought adjacent house groups into a slightly different alignment, but close kin ties still provided the basis of cooperation. Women, who did the cooking, reported a change from time to time in where they cooked if they wanted relief from the usual group or sought to gossip in a more advantageous place, but these changes were essentially brief breaks in routine.

Men did the fishing, most of them using a small paddle canoe off the reef. I accounted for 12 such canoes, but 8 were at the time either disabled or lost at sea, and one was still being built.

Of the three left, one was used almost entirely by the churchman, which meant that during that summer only two canoes were available for some 32 fishermen. Reports from these men indicated that one canoe, Andru's, kept in the eastern part of the village, was used mainly by men in that district (where it was convenient) but also by a group of men living in the extreme western section of the village. The other canoe, Betwel's, located in the western district but fairly central in the community, was used by the remainder of fishermen in that district, together with a few adjacent in the east. Analysis of this situation kin-wise revealed that lineage ties between classificatory siblings provided a most important basis for use of these scarce properties. The two canoes were regarded as the principal property of the two men who had been instrumental in building them. Where a man had need of a canoe other than the one he usually used, he asked permission on the basis of some other kinship link, often through his spouse. Use of a canoe by other than the owner required that half the fish catch be left in the canoe when it was returned.

Livestock consisted of nearly 300 chickens, about 30 ducks, and a like number of pigs. The pattern of ownership tended to be more individualistic here, although cooking and eating an animal was easily accomplished among kinsmen. Most animals roamed freely day and night, foraging for food, but pens and coops had been built, about 15 of each. Even these structures seemed to possess fewer family associations than noticed above for cook huts and copra driers. A nuclear family in one cooking group might have its own chicken coop separate from that of another nuclear family in the same group.

Prior to 1956 the village Council had opposed the establishment of retail stores on Kili other than one sponsored by the Council as a community venture. However, toward the close of that year the policy was changed, and at least one other retail store was in operation. The first of these was a cooperative enterprise by a group of ambitious young men in their 30's, belonging principally to two of the largest lineages on Kili. I believe in this case the lineage relationship was not a significant one; rather it appears to have been an organization based on compatibility and like interests. Later, however, other retails developed on the scene in which the lineage emphasis was paramount. The occasion for this blossoming of retail activity was the payment in December 1956 of $25,000 in cash to the ex-Bikini people as part of the compensation made to them by the U. S. government for loss of their rights in Bikini Atoll. The combination of ready cash and a limited supply of store goods on the island (a condition, in the latter case, which was usual for Kili because of difficulties of shipping) appears to have created a concern among the villagers about the equitable distribution of food stores and other goods. A kind of rationing was put into operation by the manager of the Council Store, the only source of trade goods on the island, with so-called "wholesale" prices charged to owners of so-called retails. Licenses were issued to some 15 men to operate these retails, and in 1957 thirteen were still active. Of these, 6 were based primarily on lineage representation as seen in the pattern of investment of dollars by lineage

members. Most of these came into being just after the cash settlement, and reflects, I think, a call upon traditional rules of organization to meet the new situation in which scarcity of supplies and possible inequities of distribution threatened. Of particular interest is the subsequent formation of 5 additional retails, the last one in June 1957, in which the investment interest was restricted to the membership of a primary family with no suggestion of lineage association. This is the direction of change on Kili at present. No restriction of sales was noted, each retail being open to anyone on the island, but in practice the goods seemed to be consumed almost entirely by members of an investment group, and few managers were able to report a profit.

We come back now to the house groups as residence units. Some are large, comprising several nuclear families, others are more limited. These are many instances where house groups located next to each other have close lineage or affinal ties for potential cooperation. But by no means all of this potential was realized in 1957, in fact, much less than I had observed earlier in 1949 on Kili and the year before that on Rongerik Atoll. The activities we have reviewed this morning involve contiguity of residence as an important basis for cooperation, in some instances supplemented importantly by lineage ties. The degree to which residence has become important to Kilians is best seen in their division of Kili into land holdings for the production of copra.

In 1954 the Council under the leadership of Juda, elected magistrate and hereditary leader of the community, decided to allot land parcels to house groups on the basis of membership size and acreage planted to coconut trees by foreign management prior to World War II. Certain inequities of land-ownership by lineages on Bikini were noted by the Council, where size of lineage membership had grown too large for inherited acreage and where other lineages were land rich. Agreement was reached by the Council on the new method which would equalize things. A date was chosen for making the allotment, and on that day all occupants of each house were vested with an equal interest in a certain parcel of land. The head of the house (in several instances, of a complex of such house groups) was named the alab, an old term on Bikini for headman status, and he was accorded the right to $1.00 as the alab share on every 100-pound sack of copra produced on that land. The remainder of the money from the sale, usually four times that amount was to be divided equally among the house occupants associated with the land, regardless of who produced the copra. Included in such land-owning groups, according to actual residence, were spouses and the children of males who ordinarily would not be included in lineage membership. In those houses (or cooperating groups of houses) where the lineage principle had contributed to the existing residence pattern, the lineage was represented in ownership. In many, if not most, houses however, the lineage principle was beclouded by one of bilateral relationship. Persons who subsequently married or for other reasons changed residence did not change their land association. New members by birth were arbitrarily assigned by the Council. The inheritance of land rights and the succession to alab-ship is confused. Some Kilians would try to follow the traditional matrilineal rules, but

the realities of the present make it impractical or impossible to execute. Some groups have obviously abandoned all pretense of matrilineality, and proceed on the principle of residential association, but without a coherent view of the whole pattern of associations within the village. Another field study on Kili is quite in order, to learn what the Kilians will have done to solve the dilemma they were in during the summer of 1957. The process by which matrilineality is being abandoned on Kili should throw light on the evolution of social systems in other parts of the Pacific both today and in pre-European times.